

# dhakacourier

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**The new social media/OTT law in the offing**

**New Market v Dhaka College**

**In conversation with the Thai Ambassador**

**A new world order?**

**Tensions flare again in Gaza**

**The delightful Little Spiderhunter**

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From the Editor-In-Chief

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# Earth Day pledge


On Earth Day, we celebrate our planet and re-dedicate ourselves to taking care of it. It is a wonderful time to remind ourselves of the fragility of our planet and the need for us to be mindful of how we treat her. Earth Day was established in 1970 by U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson after he visited an oil spill in Santa Barbara, Calif. in 1969. It is celebrated every year on April 22.

More than 1 billion people celebrate Earth Day every year, by planting new trees, cleaning up beaches and parks, and holding rallies. The idea is to raise awareness of our environment and the peril it is facing with climate change and a species that has a penchant for creating an enormous amount of waste and leaving behind as large a footprint as possible.

Earth Day also honours the achievements of the environmental movement and raises awareness of the need to protect the Earth for our sake and the sake of our children and their children. While it is great to have a special day to celebrate our planet and pledge to take better care of her, this is something that we all should be doing every day. Taking care of our home should not be something that is optional. It should not be something that we only do when we feel like it. Practising good environmental habits should be among our top priorities of everyday life.

Now is the time to make preserving our home, Planet Earth, a top priority. This should not be a political issue at all. No one can argue that it is not a good idea to take care of your own home. There are many ways we can help preserve our planet. We can recycle, we can cut down on fossil fuel use, we can compost and we can conserve energy to name a few. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions can be done as we saw during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Because of pandemic-driven lockdowns, people were forced to stay home and not travel.

As a result of this dramatic drop off in travel and economic activity, according to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO)'s Air Quality and Climate Bulletin, South East Asia saw a 40 percent reduction in the level of harmful airborne particles caused by traffic and energy production in 2020. The US Environmental Protection Agency found that overall net emissions decreased 10.6 percent from 2019 to 2020, decreasing even further by 21.4 percent when compared to 2005 levels. Similar results were reported in other countries as well.

That should be proof enough that we do have the power to make a difference if we change our habits. So let's celebrate Earth Day renewing our pledge to our planet, and let's remember that any action to help keep our home clean and lively is appreciated. It is the only home we've got, so let's do our part to take care of it. 

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Enayetullah Khan



**T**he death toll from violent midweek clashes between Dhaka College students and New Market traders rose to two, with a 26-year-old salesman succumbing to his injuries early Thursday. Mursalin worked at a clothing store in New Market and had been on life support. On Tuesday night, Nahid Hossain, 20, a delivery man for Dlink courier service, who was not involved but simply happened to be in the vicinity during the clashes died during treatment at DMCH. More than 30 people, including journalists and students, were injured as the students of Dhaka College clashed with the traders of New Market at the Nilkhet intersection around midnight on Monday and continued for nearly four hours. The whole area turned into a battleground after a fresh clash erupted between them around 10:00am on Tuesday, as a sequel to Monday midnight's tensions, according to witnesses. Brick chips and crude bombs were thrown during the chase and counter-chase between the two groups while police lobbed tear gas shells to bring the situation under control. □

**A**verage inflation in Bangladesh in March rocketed to a 17-month high. According to the latest data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the overall inflation in March was 6.22%. This was the

highest since the 6.44% measured in October 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, the prices of almost all daily necessities are still higher in rural areas than in cities and the price of food products has increased the most.



The BBS claimed that despite the massive surge, inflation in the urban areas was at a tolerable level in March. In the cities, the general index of inflation was 5.69% and in rural areas, it was 6.52%. When it comes to food items in cities, the rate was 5.49% but in rural areas, food inflation climbed to 6.71% in March. Overall inflation was recorded at 6.17% in February, meaning, the inflation rose 0.05% during the month. According to the data, general food inflation rose to 6.34% in March and non-food inflation stood at 6.04%. □

**U**pstream water running down hills following torrential rain in Meghalaya and Cherrapunji of India triggered a second phase of flash floods to hit Sunamganj, overflowing the extended Gurmar Haor in Tahirpur upazila. The flooding has risked some 2,000 hectares of crops that are close to maturing for harvest. Farmers have been considering bringing forward their harvest since the first phase of flash floods. Crops in four haors of Sunamganj's Jagannathpur Upazila have submerged after rainwater

flowed over the embankments established for crop protection.

Thousands of farmers in Sunamganj, Kishoreganj and Netrokona have been affected by the flood, which started as early as April 3 this year, due to loss of Boro paddy. During his visit on Wednesday, State Minister for Water Resources Zahid Faruk said that all individuals responsible for irregularities in dam construction would be held accountable. Local Awami League General Secretary Nurul Alam Siddiqui suggested putting a stop to engine-driven boats from operating in the area to protect the dams. □



**T**he amount of money transacted through mobile financial services increased by 23.8 per cent or Tk 13,107 crore year-on-year in February as the country's MFS operators are bringing many more services under their umbrella. Customers have also found making different kinds of payments through the MFS convenient amid a growing digital financial ecosystem. The latest Bangladesh Bank data showed that the amount of transactions through the MFS rose to Tk 68,162.8 crore in February 2022 from Tk 55,055.1 crore in the same month of 2021. Prompted by a rapid technology adoption by people, the MFS operators have brought a wide range of utility service providers under their network with a view to expanding the business after the Covid outbreak, officials of MFS operators said. □



**I**srael's air force and Palestinian militants traded fire across the Gaza frontier early Thursday as clashes erupted again at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site, worsening an escalation that has been eerily similar to the lead-up to last year's Israel-Gaza war. The violence along the Gaza front, fueled by the unrest between Israeli police and Palestinians in Jerusalem, appears to be the heaviest-cross-border fighting since last year's 11-day war and comes despite efforts to prevent a repeat.

A rocket fired from Gaza this week shattered a months-long period of calm that followed the war. Palestinian militants fired two rockets toward Israel from the Gaza Strip late Wednesday and early Thursday, and Israeli aircraft hit militant targets in the seaside, Hamas-ruled enclave. One rocket landed in the southern Israeli city of Sderot, a frequent target, and another fell short and landed in Gaza, the Israeli military said. Early Thursday, Israeli warplanes conducted airstrikes in the central Gaza Strip, local media reported. □

**F**rench President Emmanuel Macron tore into his far-right challenger Marine Le Pen in a television debate Wednesday for her ties to Russia and for wanting to strip Muslim women of their right to cover their heads in public, as

he seeks the votes he needs to win another 5-year term. In their only head-to-head confrontation before the electorate has its say in Sunday's winner-takes-all runoff vote for the presidency, Macron took the gloves off.



He argued that a loan that Le Pen's party received in 2014 from a Czech-Russian bank made her unsuitable to deal with Moscow. He also said plans by the anti-immigration candidate to ban Muslim women in France from wearing headscarves in public would trigger "civil war" in the country that has the largest Muslim population in western Europe. Le Pen, in turn, sought to appeal to voters struggling with surging prices amid the fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine. □

**S**ri Lankan police opened fire Tuesday at people protesting new fuel price increases, killing one and injuring 13 others, in the first shooting by security forces during weeks of demonstrations over the country's worst economic crisis in decades. Fifteen police personnel were also admitted to a hospital with minor injuries after clashes with protesters. Police confirmed they shot at the protesters in Rambukkana, 90 kilometres (55

miles) northeast of Colombo, the capital, and they declared a local curfew afterward.

Police spokesman Nihal Taldewa said the demonstrators were blocking railway tracks and roads and had ignored police warnings to disperse. He said protesters also threw rocks at police. Dr. Mihiri Priyangani of the government hospital in Kegalle said 14 people were brought there with suspected gunshot wounds and one had died. Three others had undergone surgeries and were being monitored. The police in the hospital had minor injuries, possibly from being hit by stones, she said. □

**N**etflix suffered its first subscriber loss in more than a decade, causing its shares to plunge 25% in extended trading amid concerns that the pioneering streaming service may have already seen its best days. The company's customer base fell by 200,000 subscribers during the January-March period, according to its quarterly earnings report released Tuesday. It's the first time that Netflix's subscribers have fallen since the streaming service became available throughout most of the world outside of China six years ago.

The drop this year stemmed in part from Netflix's decision to withdraw from Russia to protest the war against Ukraine, resulting in a loss of 700,000 subscribers. Netflix acknowledged its problems are deep rooted by projecting a loss of another 2 million subscribers during the April-June period. If the stock drop continue, Netflix shares will have lost more than half of their value so far this year — wiping out about \$150 billion in shareholder wealth in less than four months. □

# Muzzling the internet

## Courier Briefing

In February 2021, a tweet by pop star Rihanna sparked widespread condemnation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of massive farmer protests near the capital New Delhi, and served to sour an already troubled relationship between the Indian government and Twitter.

Moving to contain the backlash, officials hit Twitter with multiple injunctions to block hundreds of tweets critical of the government. Twitter complied with some and resisted others. Relations between Twitter and the Modi government have gone downhill ever since. At the heart of the standoff was a sweeping new internet law (The Indian IT Rule 2021) that puts digital platforms like Twitter and Facebook under direct government oversight.

Officials say the rules are needed to quell misinformation and hate speech and to give users more power to flag objectionable content. Police have raided Twitter's offices and have accused its India chief, Manish Maheshwari, of spreading "communal hatred" and "hurting the sentiments of Indians." At one stage, Maheshwari refused

to submit to questioning unless police promised not to arrest him, and eventually he had to leave the country.

The company released a transparency report showing India had submitted most government information requests – legal demands for account information – to Twitter. It accounted for a quarter of worldwide requests in July-December of 2020.

The new rules, in the works for years and announced in February, apply to social media companies, streaming platforms, and digital news publishers. They make it easier for the government to order social media platforms with over 5 million users to take down content that is deemed unlawful. Individuals now can request that companies remove material. If a government ministry flags content as illegal or harmful it must be removed within 36 hours. Noncompliance could lead to criminal prosecutions.

Tech companies also must assign staff to answer complaints from users, respond to government requests and ensure overall compliance with the rules. Twitter



Rihanna: Photo: AP/UNB





# INTERNET FREEDOM FOUNDATION

missed a three-month deadline in May, drawing a strong rebuke from the Delhi High Court. Eventually, after months of haggling with the government, it appointed all three officers as required.

“Twitter continues to make every effort to comply with the new IT Rules 2021. We have kept the Government of India apprised of the progress at every step of the process,” the company said in a statement to the Associated Press. The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) on the other hand, says the rules will lead to numerous cases against internet platforms and deter people from using them freely, leading to self-censorship. Many other critics say the Indian government is imposing what they call a climate of “digital authoritarianism.”

## Digital Authoritarianism?

On 3rd February 2022, the Bangladesh Telecom Regulatory Commission (BTRC) published “The Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms, 2021” (“Bangladesh Draft Regulation”) and invited comments. The IFF, despite being based in India, was one of the organisations that took the initiative to send in their observations, which it did in the form of a report.

“Our rationale behind sending the comments was that there are many similarities between the Bangladesh Draft Regulation and Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (“Indian IT Rules”). Since we have extensively worked on the Indian IT Rules since their notification in 2021 (in the form of public advocacy, representations and legal support), we provided insights into India’s experience with these rules. We hope that the report is of assistance to the BTRC as they contemplate regulation of digital,

social media and OTT platforms,” the IFF stated.

The Indian IT Rules were notified by the Government of India on 25th February 2021. The rules comprise three parts. Part I of the Rules lays down the definitions of terms. Part II imposes several obligations on social media intermediaries and is similar to Part II of the Bangladesh Draft Regulation, which does the same, the IFF says in its report.

Part-III of the Indian IT Rules regulates digital news media and OTT platforms, via a Code of Ethics and a 3-tier grievance redressal mechanism headed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. This Part is similar to Part III of the Bangladesh Draft Regulation. The only difference between the two is that the latter does not already contain a Code of Ethics, and instead empowers the Ministry of Information of Bangladesh to publish a Code at a later time.

Since its notification, Indian IT Rules have faced criticism from social media users, members of the civil society, press and intermediaries, and even by UN Special Rapporteurs. The criticism is on the grounds that these rules perversely incentivise intermediaries to censor otherwise lawful content lest they risk losing safe harbour; they undermine end-to-end encryption which is essential for protecting the privacy of users on the internet; and alter how publishers of news operate over the internet by increasing governmental oversight. Their legality has been challenged by at least 17 different entities/individuals in 6 different High Courts across the country.

Subsequently, three of those High Courts have sided with the petitioners. The Kerala High Court was the first to grant interim relief, issuing an order restraining coercive



action against the Petitioner, LiveLaw Media, under Part III of the Indian IT Rules. Subsequently, the Bombay High Court also issued an interim order, and stayed the operation of the Code of Ethics and the 3-tier grievance redressal mechanism over digital news media and OTT platforms. The Bombay High Court observed that the Rules would make people “feel suffocated to exercise their right of freedom of speech and expression, if they are made to live in present times of content regulation on the internet with the Code of Ethics hanging over their head as the Sword of Damocles.”

This order was affirmed by the Madras High Court, which also passed directions regarding Part II of the Indian IT Rules which regulates social media intermediaries. The Madras High Court found that “an oversight mechanism to control the media may rob the media of its independence and the fourth pillar, so to say, of democracy may not at all be there.” On social media, the Madras HC also observed that “Article 19(1)(a) may be infringed in how the Rules may be coercively applied to intermediaries.”

Even though the legality of the Indian IT Rules has not finally been decided, the decisions mentioned above are helpful in understanding the impact these rules have on freedom of speech and expression, the right to privacy, and how they have been viewed by constitutional courts in India.

Speaking at a webinar organised by Moulik Odhikar Surokkha Committee (Fundamental Rights Protection Committee, or MOSC), a platform for human rights activists, renowned lawyer Barrister Sara Hossain said the guideline will not only muzzle the voices of journalists and media professionals, but also citizen journalists, as well as social and political commentators.

“If the law passes, our progress on human rights, sustainable development goals, and freedom of expression fronts might be reversed. This is why the government needs to sit with all the stakeholders including human rights defenders before finalising it,” she said.

The draft needs some major revisions, she said, adding that the regulation also appears to violate the rights of people who are dissenting voices within a religion, as well as those belonging to religious minorities.

The Internet Society, an American nonprofit advocacy organisation founded in 1992 with local chapters around the world, also did an assessment. It used the Internet Impact Assessment Toolkit (IIAT) to assess how the draft regulation may affect Internet development in Bangladesh, and more broadly, the health of the global

Internet. It found that the provisions outlined in the draft regulation, specifically the stringent and overly broad requirements for Internet intermediaries, including infrastructure providers, could have serious repercussions on the usefulness of the Internet for Bangladesh and its people, endangering the very sectors that the regulation seeks to foster and protect. If enacted in its current form, the regulation could curtail the country’s digital transformation without imparting clear benefits for its economy and society.

In order to ensure that Bangladesh continues to benefit from the Internet, the Internet Society said that “future iterations of the regulation must align its provisions with the principles that make the Internet an open, globally connected, secure and trustworthy resource for all.”

## Angle of attack

In June 2016, following prolonged talks with the Bangladesh government, Facebook, Google and Microsoft all agreed to do more to remove ‘inappropriate content’ from the internet. This was announced by the then-State Minister for Telecoms, Tarana Halim, who said: “After intense discussion with Facebook, Google and Microsoft, it has been agreed that they will respond to requests within 48 hours”.

The agreement was announced just weeks after major tech companies agreed to a new code of conduct to combat online hate speech.

In 2019, we learned that the government had established “wider control over online content” through a state of the art technology, installed at the cost of Tk 159 crore, enabling the government to block any online content, including Facebook page or account in just three minutes. The system was installed under the Cyber Threat Detection and Response project of the department of telecommunications launched in July, 2017.

In February 2022, a delegation from Facebook said the social media platform will look at Bangladesh-related issues in the light of the country’s laws, tradition, culture, values and rules and regulations as much as possible.

Facebook also said it will step up responding to the requests from Bangladesh authorities regarding its contents relating to militancy, religious incitement and anti-state elements.

The assurance came when a delegation from the regional headquarters of Facebook in Singapore met Posts and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar in Dhaka.

Clearly, none of these efforts have yielded results to the government's satisfaction.

Addressing a virtual press conference, Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman said if the proposed regulation for the digital, social media and over-the-top (OTT) platforms is enacted into law, there will be a risk of Bangladesh becoming a "surveillance-based" country.

The graft watchdog raised concerns over a number of clauses in the draft regulation, stressing the need for bringing significant changes to them before going for the enforcement.

According to clause 6.01 (d) of the draft regulation, either BTRC or a court with competent jurisdiction can issue a content removal request on grounds related to sovereignty, integrity or security of the country, decency or morality, friendly relationship with foreign countries, or defamation, TIB said in its comments on the regulation.

An intermediary must remove the content promptly, but in any event within 72 hours. Fundamentally, this requirement raises several concerns, it said.

Clause 7.03 of the draft law says upon receiving a court order or instructions from the BTRC, messaging service operator is required to track the originator of a message and disclose information about him or her to the authorities, if so asked.

Effectively, this provision requires every message, photo, video and other communications sent over a messaging service to be "fingerprinted", it said.

It added that most messaging services now use end-to-end encryption, which means that this clause will require the services to break those encryptions, violating the legitimate expectations of citizens regarding the privacy of their correspondence and other means of communication.

Iftekharuzzaman said while formulating the regulation, the government has to consider that people's fundamental rights, especially freedom of speech and freedom of expression, are not put at risk in the name of controlling digital, social media and OTT platforms.

For its part, the BTRC says the commission is formulating a policy under the direction of the high court.

Incidentally, the allegation of serving 'unethical and offensive' video content on various web platforms

relying on OTT (Over the Top) is long-standing. The telecommunications regulator is preparing a guideline to control these. The BTRC is also working on monitoring, identifying and determining procedures for the distribution of unethical and offensive video content on OTT platforms. The fear is that it is bundling in a set of draconian measures alongside it to curb freedom of expression on the net. And this is well-founded.

Asked about this, the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications told Bangla Tribune that the High Court has directed BTRC to formulate a policy on OTT. He said that the policy has been published on the website of the commission and the opinions of the public have also been taken. There is still room for comment. BTRC is meeting with the stakeholders and taking their views. The High Court will decide on the basis of the final draft later.

He added, "There is nothing to be excited about right now. Wait and see what the High Court decides."

Asked whether the new policy would impede freedom of expression, Jabbar said, "The constitution has given freedom of expression. Will the High Court act outside the constitution?"

## How would it work?

The fact that the BTRC has sought the comments of stakeholders or the public cannot be of much comfort, given the previous experience with the Digital Security Act. But there is scope for the proposed law to be understood better. A catchy headline that quoted one of the participants at the webinar organised by MOSC out of context demonstrates that last point.

The headline in vernacular daily Samakal implied that with the passage of the proposed BTRC regulations, even posting an innocuous status such as "Not in a good mood today" could make someone liable for punishment. In reality though, the draft law contains no provision to target the public, or to 'punish' them.

The crux of the proposed BTRC law is not to punish individuals, but rather to prevent content the government deems troublesome from being available to the public on social media platforms. Content removal. Censorship in other words, but with the crucial difference that this would now target the platforms - instead of the individuals posting on these platforms, who in many cases may be out of reach.

A real world example will help to make this clearer. We know how the government has been vexed by the content



Image: Collected

posted by US-based journalist Kanak Sarwar on his Youtube channel in the last couple of years. Indeed, one of the cases in which the High Court directed the BTRC to find ways to have content removed from the internet was to do with him. It has been even more frustrated by the lack of a way to prevent him from doing so, given that he is in the US, and Youtube are not bound by any laws to respond positively to requests on the part of the government to have the content on his channel taken down for viewers in Bangladesh. They would only agree to requests that align with their own self-regulatory code of conduct (e.g. hate speech).

The principal aim of the draft regulation will be to bind sites like Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, etc, to the rules and regulations laid down by the government. In the most relevant section of the draft law, it is stated: "...an intermediary (the platforms).... upon receiving actual knowledge in the form of an order by a court of competent jurisdiction or on being notified by BTRC, shall not host, store or publish any unlawful information, which is prohibited under any law for the time being in force in relation to the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of Bangladesh; security of the State; friendly relations with foreign States; public order; decency or morality; in relation to contempt of court; defamation; incitement to an offence relating to the above, or any information which is prohibited under any law for the time being in force."

That is sufficiently broad and vague to potentially include anything the government may ever consider offensive. In case the content is already posted (as is likely in most cases): "...if any such information is hosted, stored or published, the intermediary shall remove or disable access to that information, as early as possible, but in no case later than seventy two hours from the receipt of the court order or on being notified by the Government or BTRC, as the case may be."

So in the case of a Kanar Sarwar, once the new law is enacted, the government would simply need to notify the relevant platform that it wants the content it deems troublesome removed, and then wait 72 hours. The law would also require the intermediaries to appoint compliance officers resident in Bangladesh to coordinate with the government on all this. They will also have to register with the government to keep providing their services in the territory of Bangladesh, and violations of the law will risk loss of registration.

And what if they don't? In India we've seen how the head of Twitter had to leave the country under threat of arrest. Bangladesh's draft regulation specifically refers to violations incurring penalties spelled out in section 66A and section 64 of the BTRC Act, i.e. fines of up to Tk 3 billion and/or imprisonment for up to 5 years.

It now remains to be seen how far the platforms are ready to play ball. ❑





## COSMOS GROUP

### Let's build a Greener Future Together for Bangladesh

Building a sustainable future together begins with our lifestyle. At **Cosmos**, together with our partners, we provide great ideas to help make green living easier and more accessible.

**Cosmos Group** and its Philanthropic arm Cosmos Foundation, Cosmos Ocean Initiative and WildTeam are committed to building a Greener Future for our Nation and our future generation.

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Awely



The Rufford Foundation



YOUNGONE



ZOO Outreach Organization



Wildlife Trust of India



United News of Bangladesh



Dhaka University



Wildlife Vets International



Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies



Isabela Foundation



IUCN



Afsan Chowdhury

## The New Market - Dhaka College conflict syndrome won't go away

There seems to be an unusual quantum of shock at what happened in Dhaka's New market where the best boys in town – Dhaka College- fought with the shopkeepers that went far into the night. No one is sure about the exact chain of events but the relationship has always been tense between the two, even going back to the pre-1971 era.

Some are in denial of that but conflicts did happen even then and once in a while, "favours" were asked from the shop keepers which were granted but none too happily by the shopkeeper crowd. However the scale was low and often not noticed by all. The students and the shopkeepers came from two worlds apart and never the twain shall meet scenario was always there.

Prior to 1971, Dhaka College was the first step forward into

the big world of adult academia. It was the first exposure to post-school education and the best boys from all over East Pakistan came to study here. Not only were they great students but also good in arts and literature. Many writers and scholars have come from their ranks and it's no accident that much of the intellectual landscape has been painted by its students in their professional world.

But there was also a dark world which many chose to ignore, the fallout from the academic elitism that Dhaka College preached.

### The drop outs and fall outs

Dhaka College didn't take care of the students; the best students took care of themselves. That meant a section of the students, particularly those who came from outside





Dhaka, suddenly exposed to the freedom of a life in hostels found other things to do other than study. Which is why despite being the target of the best male students of the country, there were failures and not so good results every year.

Remembering now, many in their nostalgia forget that not the best made it and many fell off the rails. Dhaka College focused on brand building using the top layers in any given year. This top 50-100 actually never really needed the teachers and many of the students knew much more than the teachers. These "best students" did well throughout their academic life as they were self-driven. Very few were produced by the Dhaka College.

Everyone was therefore just ordinary beings who happened to be good students. If the conditions changed, they would also change. And though many don't see pre-1971 days as full of unsavory deeds, they did occur and that included occasional conflicts with the local shopkeepers. The economics then was itself smaller, people's need even less, but even within that framework, boundaries were crossed several times. They were signs of things to come. They could do it so they did.

If the shopkeepers and vendors were not of the docile variety the students in their own space were not either. This prone to conflict attitude was inside many obviously. Of the nice well-spoken student leaders shepherding new kids around were several who stood charged with murder and convicted only a few years later in the Mohsin hall murder case.

## What happened after 1971?

The college didn't change, the results didn't, the students didn't but circumstances did and that created a new history about the conflicts that have emerged in society in the last 50 years. Although the best students in town and some who were FFs too, the first batch of students after 1971 saw even some who cheated in the first HSC exam. It's a free for all affairs where just about everything was allowed and much was done by some. It's always the same: some do it if they can. Only their numbers have gone up many times.

Conflicts between the students of Dhaka College and other colleges as well as all the local business establishments have grown over time. Both have used each other and that is the point that needs to be mentioned. It's not a one sided game and it's reported in some media that initially, a section of the shopkeepers hired some students as muscle. This fight with some other students got involved and this went on becoming bigger and bigger till it has become a massive mess. A life has been lost of a person who had nothing to do with either side. It's the death of the innocent that is the most important motif of them all. It's the innocent who isn't safe.

The fight between two groups expresses a much wider fight. The establishment is the students- educated, middle, officially supported – versus the counter establishment who are not elites but increasingly powerful even in the urban space , not their natural hunting grounds which show that a conflict is on which no side can contain or win and there are no mediators in sight either. □



# Thailand favours increased connectivity and trade with burgeoning Bangladesh, says its envoy

AKM Moinuddin



*Thai Ambassador to Bangladesh Makawadee Sumitmor. Photo: Courtesy*

**T**hailand has said Bangladesh's economy would be more resilient provided it diversifies its sources of income rather than relying heavily on readymade industry.

The Southeast Asian nation is also keen on promoting economic cooperation with Bangladesh through increased connectivity and bilateral trade, said the country's ambassador in Dhaka.

"Bangladesh should also consider adding more value to its RMG products by building capacity on design, and research and development to enable local brands to compete in the global market," Thai Ambassador to Bangladesh Makawadee Sumitmor told UNB in an interview this week.

She noted that both countries have set the goal to increase the bilateral trade volume to US\$ 2 billion.

During the past five decades Bangladesh has progressively

built the nation with growing per capita income, said the ambassador.

Bangladesh, she said, will graduate from LDC status in a few years enjoying continued GDP growth even during the pandemic.

"The success of Bangladesh in the RMG sector is impressive and the country could rightfully be called "Wardrobe of the World." This is a remarkable job that you have proven to the world," she said.

Responding to a question, Ambassador Sumitmor said the relevant authority of Bangladesh is conducting a feasibility study on the free trade agreement with Thailand.

If the agreement could be signed, it would reduce tariff barriers and increase trade flows, she said, adding that Thailand has approved Duty Free Quota Free (DFQF) scheme to LDCs, which means Bangladesh can export

7,187 agricultural and industrial products to Thailand without tariff and quota.

The Thai envoy said one way to boost bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Thailand is to establish a direct sea transport route.

“We signed a MoU between Chittagong Port and Ranong Port last December to establish direct coastal shipping service,” she said.

Previously, shipments have to transit through Singapore or Sri Lanka, which would take 12-15 days.

However, the two countries are trying to set up a direct coastal shipping route between Ranong Port and Chittagong Port to reduce time and cost in accordance with the MoU between the two ports.

The relevant authorities are discussing details to realize this shipping service that will shorten the transport time to three days.

The ambassador said Thailand has a project to connect Ranong Port on the Andaman coast to Chumphon Port in the Gulf of Thailand through a land bridge.

In the long term, she said, Bangladesh will have an alternative route to export its products to countries in the Pacific Ocean that is cost-effective in addition to the Malacca Strait.

### Thailand's Policy towards Bangladesh

From the beginning, the envoy said, Thailand's policy towards Bangladesh has always been to promote friendship and cooperation.

In the past five decades, she said, the two countries have fostered cooperation in many areas such as trade, investment and connectivity.

Bangladesh is a next door neighbour of ASEAN and can serve as the gateway between Southeast Asia and South Asia, said Ambassador Sumitmor.

At the same time, she said, Thailand will intensify cooperation with Bangladesh in regional and multilateral frameworks like BIMSTEC, IORA and ACD to create growth and development.

BIMSTEC will be particularly important because Thailand is the new Chair of BIMSTEC from April 2022 until the next summit.

### Priorities amid Covid Recovery

The ambassador described the relations with Bangladesh as warm and cordial with close interactions on many sectors but she thought there is still ample room to strengthen the ties further.

She said the Covid-19 has affected nearly every aspect in their life including the pace of cooperation.

Fortunately, the envoy said, normal life and business as usual are gradually resuming.

This started with the 2nd Thailand-Bangladesh Bilateral Consultations in Bangkok that was co-chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Thailand and the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

“At the same time, I intend to strengthen people-to-people contact since it is the foundation of our relations. That is why the celebration of the golden jubilee of our relations is focused on events to enable Thais and Bangladeshis to know each other better,” she said.

### Green Partnership

Ambassador Sumitmor said Bangladesh and Thailand share the same challenge on the effects from climate change.

Bangkok is only 2 metres above sea level, similar to many areas in Bangladesh. “I appreciate the endeavour of Bangladesh to address this problem such as by cancelling many coal-fired electricity plants in consideration of the effects on global warming,” she said.

“In the post-Covid world, I believe more countries will give priority to sustainability and resilience from disruptions like pandemic and climate change,” said the ambassador.

Thailand has adopted the Bio-Circular-Green Economy or BCG Model as the underlying concept for national development.

“We plan to be more innovation-driven and go greener to make the Thai economy more value-based and sustainable,” she said.

This corresponds to Bangladesh's policy to reduce the impacts from climate change. “So I think both sides can forge a “green partnership” to exchange best practices and organize capacity building activities.”



50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS  
**THAILAND-BANGLADESH**

### **Rohingya Repatriation**

Ambassador Sumitmor said Thailand will give continued support for ASEAN to play a visible and enhanced role in providing humanitarian assistance, facilitating the repatriation of displaced persons and promoting sustainable development in Rakhine State.

"We would like to see a sustainable solution to the problem and we are ready to continue our partnership with all parties concerned," she said.

Thailand has been providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya displaced persons since 2017.

"We contributed financial assistance through several UN agencies such as UNHCR, WFP and WHO to provide basic needs," she said, adding that this year, they are collaborating with UNICEF to renovate a resource centre in one of the camps in Cox's Bazar.

### **Tourism Potential**

The ambassador said Thailand is a favourite destination for Bangladeshi travellers. In 2019, about 140,000 Bangladeshis visited Thailand for tourism including 4,300 going for medical treatment.

"They generated about 6.7 billion baht to the Thai economy," said the envoy, mentioning that the Tourism

Authority of Thailand is working "actively to re-engage" with travellers in Bangladesh. "They even have a newsletter and Instagram in Bangla."

She said Bangladeshi people have a very friendly attitude about Thailand and Thai people, which makes the work of the Embassy much easier. "They are the second largest market in South Asia."

In sharp contrast, the envoy said, only 4,800 Thais visited Bangladesh in 2019, mostly for work purposes.

"I think we should try to encourage more Thai tourists to think of Bangladesh as another holiday destination not far from home," she said.

There is potential and interest, which will eventually help strengthen people-to-people contact, said Ambassador Sumitmor.

"We could begin with the promotion of Buddhist historical sites in Bangladesh as part of the Buddhist circuit that is connected with India, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka to attract more pilgrims and travellers," she said.

She suggested Bangladesh develops facilities for tourists such as rest areas along the highways and accommodations with reasonable prices to attract more tourists. □



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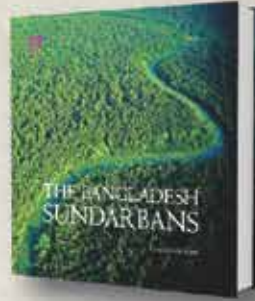
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# Putin claims victory in Mariupol but won't storm steel plant

Adam Schreck

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed victory in the battle for Mariupol on Thursday, even as he ordered his troops not to risk more losses by storming the giant steel plant containing the last Ukrainian holdouts in the city.

Instead, he directed his forces to seal off the Azovstal plant "so that not even a fly comes through."

Russian troops have bombarded the southeastern port city since the early days of the war and largely reduced it to ruins. Top officials have repeatedly claimed it was about to fall, but Ukrainian forces have stubbornly held on.

In recent weeks, a few thousand defenders, by Russia's estimate, holed up along with hundreds of civilians in the sprawling steel plant, as Putin's forces pounded the site and repeatedly issued ultimatums ordering their surrender.

But on Thursday, as he has done before, the Russian

leader seemed to shift the narrative and declared victory without taking the plant, which covers 11 square kilometers (4 square miles) and is threaded with some 24 kilometers (15 miles) of tunnels and bunkers.

"The completion of combat work to liberate Mariupol is a success," he said in an appearance with his defense minister. "Congratulations."

Ukraine scoffed at the idea of a Russian victory.

"This situation means the following: They cannot physically capture Azovstal. They have understood this. They suffered huge losses there," said Oleksiy Arestovich, an adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

The capture of Mariupol would represent the Kremlin's biggest victory yet of the war in Ukraine. It would help Moscow secure more of the coastline, complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia seized in 2014, and enable Putin to shift more



*Damaged and burned vehicles are seen at a destroyed part of the Illich Iron & Steel Works Metallurgical Plant, as smoke rises from the Metallurgical Combine Azovstal during heavy fighting, in an area controlled by Russian-backed separatist forces in Mariupol, Ukraine, Monday, April 18, 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his forces not to storm the last remaining Ukrainian stronghold in the besieged city of Mariupol but to block it "so that not even a fly comes through." Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told Putin on Thursday that the sprawling Azovstal steel plant where Ukrainian forces were holed up was "securely blocked." File Photo: AP/UNB*



forces to the larger battle now underway for Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland.

By painting the mission in Mariupol a success, Putin may be seeking to take the focus off the plant, which has become a global symbol of defiance. Even without the plant, the Russians appear to have control of the rest of the city and its vital port, though that facility seems to have been extensively damaged.

"The Russian agenda now is not to capture these really difficult places where the Ukrainians can hold out in the urban centers, but to try and capture territory and also to encircle the Ukrainian forces and declare a huge victory," retired British Rear Adm. Chris Parry said.

Putin's order appeared to mean Russian forces intend to maintain the siege and wait for the defenders to surrender when they run out of food or ammunition. The bombardment of the plant could well continue.

Western nations, meanwhile, rushed to pour heavy weapons into Ukraine to help it counter the new offensive in the east.

U.S. President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million in military assistance for Kyiv, including heavy artillery, 144,000 rounds of ammunition and drones.

But he also warned that the \$13.6 billion approved last month by the U.S. Congress for military and humanitarian aid is "almost exhausted" and more will be needed.

Russia Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu estimated 2,000 Ukrainian troops remained at the steel plant. Ukrainian officials said about 1,000 civilians were also trapped there along with 500 wounded soldiers. Shoigu said the site was blocked off and predicted it could be taken in days.

"I consider the proposed storming of the industrial area pointless. I order to abort it," Putin responded, saying he was concerned about "preserving the life and health of our soldiers and officers."

"There is no need to climb into these catacombs and crawl underground through these industrial facilities," the Russian leader added. "Block off this industrial area so that not even a fly comes through."

All told, more than 100,000 people were believed trapped with little or no food, water, heat or medicine in Mariupol, which had a prewar population of about 430,000.

The city has seized worldwide attention as the scene of

some of the worst suffering of the war, including deadly airstrikes on a maternity hospital and a theater.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said her country and others are pressuring Russia to allow civilians out of Mariupol and to stop striking potential evacuation routes.

Four buses with civilians managed to escape the city on Wednesday after several unsuccessful attempts, according to Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk.

Ukraine has repeatedly accused Russia of launching attacks to block civilian evacuations from the city. On Thursday, at least two Russian attacks hit the city of Zaporizhzhia, a way station for people fleeing Mariupol, though no one was wounded, the regional governor said.


Parry called the decision about the steel plant a change in "operational approach" as Russia tries to learn from its failures in the 8-week-old conflict, which began with expectations of a lightning offensive that would crush Ukraine's outgunned and outnumbered forces and capture Kyiv. Instead, Moscow's troops became bogged down by unexpectedly tenacious resistance with ever-mounting casualties and retreated from the capital.

For weeks now, Russian officials have said capturing the Donbas, Ukraine's mostly Russian-speaking industrial east, is the war's main goal. Moscow's forces opened the new phase of the war this week — a deadly drive along a 300-mile (480-kilometer) front from the northeastern city of Kharkiv to the Azov Sea — to do just that.

"They've realized if they get sort of held up in these sort of really sticky areas like Mariupol, they're not going to cover the rest of the ground," Parry said.

In Luhansk, one of two regions that make up the Donbas, the governor said Russian forces control 80% of his region. Before Russia invaded on Feb. 24, the Kyiv government controlled 60% of Luhansk.

Britain's Defense Ministry said that Russia probably wants to demonstrate significant successes ahead of Victory Day on May 9, the proudest day on the Russian calendar, marking the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.

"This could affect how quickly and forcefully they attempt to conduct operations in the run-up to this date," the ministry said. 

*From the Associated Press*



# Russia and China are moving closer together. Is this a new world order?

*Now that Putin and his generals have threatened Russia's economic power by invading Ukraine, they have one place left to turn: China*

Ilya Matveev



*Russian President Vladimir Putin meets Chinese President Xi Jinping Photo: Xinhua*

**T**wo separate movements have taken place in the resurgent Russia since the early 2000s.

One is primarily economic.

Russia's business elite has joined the ranks of the global rich, assuming the role of intermediary between the domestic resource sector and international financial markets. The number of Russian business people on the Forbes dollar billionaire list soared from just eight in 2001

to 87 in 2008, while real-estate markets in London and Dubai saw record purchases by the Russian nouveau riche with their bottomless pockets.

Importantly, Russia's role in the global economy went beyond the resource periphery. Russian corporations assumed command and control functions in the post-Soviet space, expanding outward investment and capturing Soviet-era supply chains. Some went even further, buying steel mills in the US and cell phone

operators in India.

Russia's new position was best described as sub-imperialist: a regional power that generally plays by the rules of Euro-Atlantic capitalism, yet is able to dictate its own terms of integration into the global economy. Another useful term for this strategy is "sovereign globalisation".

The second movement was primarily political.

Speaking at the 2007 edition of the annual Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin for the first time presented a comprehensive list of grievances to the West, directly challenging the post-1989 world order. The Munich speech revealed Putin's shallow, cynical vision of the world: a small number of 'sovereign' states carve out their 'spheres of influence', while others are relegated to the status of mere 'territories' subject to outside control.

The speech marked Putin's characteristic style of foreign policy thinking. He has always been ready to expose 'Western hypocrisy' (indeed, not without reason), but he never offered any alternative foundation for the world order besides the principle of 'might makes right'.

Talking to George W Bush, then US president, at the 2008 NATO summit, Putin apparently claimed that Ukraine was "not even a state", and that Russia would dismantle it by annexing Crimea and the country's eastern regions if Ukraine ever joined NATO. In the late 2000s, Russia launched a comprehensive modernisation of its army. The seeds of violence and chaos were planted.

## From belligerent rhetoric to full-blown war

For a time, however, it seemed that there was a synergy between these economic and political movements in Russia. Belligerent rhetoric could be interpreted as a bargaining tactic, not a declaration of intent. Furthermore, Russia's heavy-handed attempts at influencing politics in neighbouring states dovetailed with the external ambitions of its corporations. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Russia's regional alliance with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, illustrates this ambivalence: it represents both geopolitical and economic goals, being something of a two-headed Janus.

However, this synergy turned out to be short-lived: the events of 2014 decisively shifted the balance in favour of the second movement, essentially reversing the first. Full-scale confrontation with the West seemed like the logical outcome of the worldview presented in Putin's Munich speech – yet it was in direct contradiction with Russia's previous mode of integration into global capitalism.

No one expected Putin and the national security establishment to threaten the position of Russia's ruling class to such an extent. How did this become possible? This question presents perhaps the biggest challenge for analysing Russia's recent trajectory.

At the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013–14, the Kremlin was still driven by a combination of geopolitical and economic concerns that intersected in Ukraine's unwillingness to join the Russian-led EAEU and its preference for European integration. However, at a later stage of the crisis, security issues overshadowed everything else for the Russian leadership.

The most likely reason for the Russian annexation of Crimea was the threat of losing its naval base in Sevastopol, after the February 2014 departure of pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych. And the annexation of Crimea started a chain of events that led to the unravelling of Russia's previous economic strategy.

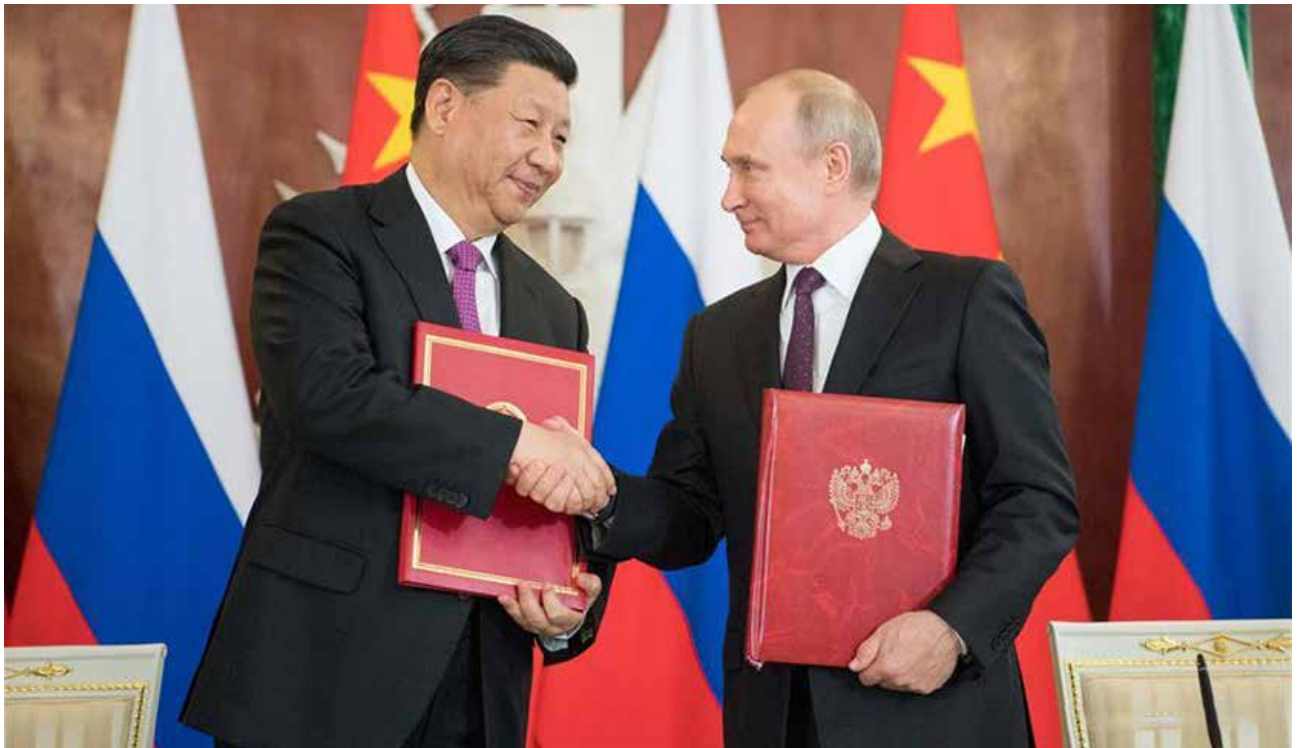
Russian businesses suffered from sanctions after 2014, and the country's economy was thrown into a deep recession, with outward investment falling to mid-2000s levels. In dealing with post-Soviet countries, Russia could no longer rely on economic leverage. It also lost the last shreds of 'soft power': the 'Russian model' became repulsive rather than attractive. What was left was violence and war. As I wrote last November: "The formula – 'if not by tanks, then by banks' – no longer applies. Now, it is just tanks."

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine completed the arc that began in 2014. Russia's murderous aggression has turned it into a pariah. Its position is no longer sub-imperialist in any meaningful sense. The question is: what is its future place in the world?

## Russia's relationship with China

In order to answer this question, we need to investigate a third movement, this time global in nature. The United States–China axis at the heart of the global economy has been fracturing for several years. Trade wars and the bipartisan anti-China consensus in the US indicate that the previous economic and political relationship between the two countries is over. Russia's reckless assault on Ukraine is accelerating the global tectonic shift that this movement entails.

Rhetoric aside (as recently as 4 February, Russia and China declared that "friendship between the two states has no limits"), Russia's actions almost mechanically propel it towards China. Under the current conditions of financial and logistical blockade, China becomes Russia's



*Chinese President Xi Jinping (L) and his Russian President Vladimir Putin sign the statements on elevating bilateral ties to the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era and on strengthening contemporary global strategic stability, and witness the signing of a number of cooperation documents, after their talks in Moscow, Russia, June 5, 2019. Xi Jinping held talks with Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin in Moscow. Photo: Xinhua*

economic lifeline, insufficient as it is. Putin clearly had extensive consultations with the Chinese leadership before launching the invasion of Ukraine. While being rather cautious in their foreign policy statements, Chinese officials apparently began an internal propaganda campaign at home, defending Russia.

What does China get from this relationship? Hu Xijin, a commentator for official Chinese media, states it rather succinctly. His article is worth a long quote:

With Russia as a partner, if the US carries out maximum strategic coercion against China, China won't be afraid of the US energy blockade, and our food supply will be secure. So will other raw materials. It will be harder for the US to make up its mind in engaging in a strategic showdown with China.

If a war breaks out in the Taiwan Straits or in the South China Sea, the US will find it hard to impose nuclear blackmail toward China, as China's conventional forces are getting increasingly stronger to overwhelm those of the US, and no matter [if] Russia supports China or remains neutral at that time, it will be a super nuclear force which is hostile toward the US. China itself is a nuclear power. And the US will have to be wary of Russia leaping from a position of nuclear parity with the US to a position with nuclear advantage.

In effect, the long-term deterioration of the US–China relationship, which is structural in nature, requires China to value its partnership with Russia. This will reduce the asymmetry in China–Russia relations somewhat, but not eliminate it completely. The Russian leadership will face tough bargaining with China in economic matters, with Chinese officials fully appreciating Russia's catastrophic position. Nevertheless, the contours of a closer alliance – and a new world order – do seem to emerge.

Differences with the Cold War era abound. The China–Russia alliance is pragmatic and conjunctural, not ideological. Economically, this kind of alliance between state capitalisms is probably stronger and more flexible than the Eastern Bloc.

Still, perhaps the key difference with the Soviet Union is that neither China nor Russia truly offers an alternative to the Western capitalist system, even rhetorically. Both countries take particular pride in rejecting universal ideological claims, in effect resorting to pure economic and military domination with an ultimate goal of perpetuating the power of narrow oligarchic elites. It is the international Left's task to fight for a utopian horizon in a world without hope. ◻

*From openDemocracy*





## FOUR DECADES OF FEARLESS JOURNALISM

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# Why do Russians support the war against Ukraine?

*More than 100 new interviews by Russian researchers have shed light on the different groups in Russian society who are pro-war – and why*

Svetlana Erpyleva

Since the very beginning of the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, the reaction of Russians themselves to the war has remained a central question. What do they think about the war? Why do people support it?

Opinion polls generally show that the majority of Russian citizens support Russian military actions in Ukraine. But social scientists have criticised these polls as unreliable. They point out that many of these surveys are run by polling companies loyal to the Russian state; that respondents in authoritarian regimes tend to choose answers that emphasise their loyal attitude towards the authorities; and that all polling companies, including independent organisations, face a high number of rejections when asking people to participate, which again biases the results towards respondents who support

government policy.

Most importantly, opinion polls do not show how people who apparently support the Russian military's 'special operation' in Ukraine think. Who are these people? What exactly do they support? What is the logic behind their thinking?

Only a more in-depth study of Russians' perception of the war in Ukraine can answer these questions.

## Our research

Public Sociology Laboratory, an independent research collective, began conducting in-depth interviews in Russia on 27 February and continues to do so today.



*A local resident walks past a damaged vehicle marked with the letter Z, which has become a symbol of the Russian military, in the Ukraine city of Mariupol, on April 13, 2022. Photo: AP/UNB*

We collected interviews with people both offline and online.

The offline work included interviews at public events in major cities of Russia (mainly Moscow and St Petersburg) – for example, at anti-war or pro-war gatherings – and interviews during the daily routine of our interviewers, for example, with the cashier of a store near home, a hairdresser in a regular salon, a bartender in a favourite bar, fellow train passengers, and so on.

The online interviews were conducted with people who responded to call-outs on social networks, and with people found by the ‘snowball’ method – where a previous respondent or personal acquaintance of the interviewer recruits other people.

Propaganda and repression mean it is becoming increasingly difficult to get people’s permission to discuss the war. At the time of writing, our archive contains 134 anonymous sociological interviews with an average duration of 40 to 50 minutes. Of these, 30 interviews were recorded with those who identify themselves as supporting Russia’s military operations in Ukraine.

We often think of those who support the war as people who believe in Russian state propaganda, who believe Ukraine has been ‘captured by Nazis’ and/or that Ukraine (with the help of NATO) was planning an attack on Donbas and Crimea, and then on Russia.

Another stereotype is that these people support Putin or are ready to ignore the negative consequences of the West’s economic sanctions against Russia.

But our research shows that the reasons people support the Russian military operation in Ukraine are more complicated. The very first interviews we took demonstrated that we would not be able to compile a single portrait of a person who supports the war against Ukraine. Instead, we found a range of types of support, which we have separated into different groups.

### **(1) The state propaganda audience**

Among Russians who support the military’s actions against Ukraine, we found people who tend to reproduce the clichés of Russian state propaganda in their reasoning.

These people trust official Russian sources of information (and most often do not consume other media). They justify the war by referring to the need to protect the inhabitants of Donbas from the Ukrainian regime (referred to as “nationalist”, “Nazi” or “fascist”) and to fight Ukrainian

“Nazism” or “fascism” in general.

These people are concerned about civilian casualties among Ukrainians, but they believe the Ukrainian army is responsible for this: the latter, they say, hide in residential areas and provoke return fire on civilians. They are inclined to admit that the sanctions will hit the Russian economy, but are ready to “endure” their consequences. They support Putin and despite the fact that they see internal problems in Russia, they are ready to forgive these problems during a difficult time for the country.

When conducting interviews with these informants, however, we noticed one interesting pattern: the more time that had passed since Russia’s initial invasion, the more likely these people were ready to doubt their picture of the world.

In the first week of the war, none of the supporters of this type suggested that information received from official Russian sources could be inaccurate or incomplete.

A 52-year-old former doctor in Moscow interviewed at the beginning of the war said she constantly watched live broadcasts by state propagandist Vladimir Solovyov online – where he often interviews invited experts – and then proceeded to compare it with information from official state sources, the Echo Moscow radio station and independent Dozhd TV channel, which were shut down soon after the start of the war.

“I compare [official sources and Solovyov] to what Dozhd and Echo tell me, and it turns out that Echo and Dozhd, excuse me, were closed down correctly. Well, because what they were broadcasting was... was just embarrassing,” she told us.

And here are the words of an informant interviewed on 18 March, three weeks after the start of the war, who expresses some doubt over what the media are reporting:

“There is no genocide, at least from the Russian side. I say this on the basis of what I hear from the media, what we are given. It seems to me that no one except the [Russian] government knows what is really happening there. No one is giving me military intelligence.” (m, 44 years old, Yoshkar-Ola, builder, supports the war)

### **(2) Supporters of the ‘Russian world’**

We also found conscious, ideologically motivated supporters of the imperial project among our interviewees. These are people who formed their attitude to Russian foreign policy (in general, and to neighbouring





*December 2021: Russian president Vladimir Putin gives his annual press conference Photo: (c) ITAR-TASS News Agency*

states in particular) long before the 2022 invasion. These are mainly people with imperial sympathies and/or nationalistic views, who dream of a strong Russia that would finally defeat its eternal enemy: the West.

These people not only justify Russia's war against Ukraine, but welcome it. In their eyes, the conflict between Russia and the Western world has been going on for a long time. The war on Ukraine is thus an attempt to establish peace in the future (despite the militant rhetoric of NATO), end aggressive nationalism in Ukraine and return eastern Ukrainians back into the "Russian world".

Thus one informant, a 42-year-old music industry worker in St Petersburg, explains his support for the "special operation" in the following terms: "This was not a surprise, because I follow the development of international relations and the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and so on, this whole story. Ukraine is just one of the angles [of the confrontation between Russia and the West]. Everything was building up towards this – it was clear how it was being prepared... This decision [to invade] will contribute to the establishment of peace in Eastern Europe."

Or take the explanation of a freelance video editor, 28, in Moscow: "For starters, there is a threat to Russian

statehood from the Nazi-adjacent regime built in Ukraine, which has been pumped full with Western weapons and is built on an ideology of hating Russia and Russians... First of all, we are talking about the security of Russia. It was on the basis of Russia's security interests that the decision was made to annex Crimea in 2014. And then, indeed, the denazification of Ukraine, the rivalry with NATO on the territory of Ukraine, the protection of our, in general, gas pipeline on the territory of Ukraine."

These people are skeptical about Russian TV propaganda, but rather because they think it is stupid and ineffective – they would prefer to have "better propaganda". This group knows that Russian forces have killed Ukrainian civilians, but tend to believe that a) the Russian army is trying to avoid civilian casualties, b) the Armed Forces of Ukraine occupy positions in residential areas and provoke casualties, and c) victims are inevitable in any war.

"You can sympathise [with Ukrainians], you can worry [about what is happening], all of that," said the music industry worker. "But here the situation is what it is. War is war. This war continues only because the Ukrainian side wants to continue it."

People in this group are not afraid of sanctions because, from their point of view, sanctions will only help Russia

rid itself of its economic dependence on the West. They support Putin's foreign policy, but may be critical of domestic politics. There is no reason to believe that these people are liable to change their attitude towards the war.

### (3) The NATO threat

The third group would prefer that there was no war – but, since it has begun, justify the conflict by the need to respond to NATO's eastward advance.

A 27-year-old clerk from Moscow told us: "I think that it should have been possible to come to an agreement in the past eight years, find some ways of contact in order to resolve this issue through diplomacy, without military action.

"Unfortunately, Putin launched a special operation. Again, there are prerequisites for this. I consider Russia a great country, isolated from the world, which is pursuing its own path. And, of course, the threat from NATO certainly exists. After all, these are two opposing camps and NATO military bases are placed around Russia. We have already lost many friendly countries in this matter. We've lost Ukraine. Well, since they couldn't come to an agreement, then of course... I think the special operation should be carried out to ensure security in the Russian Federation."

These people are sceptical of Russian military propaganda and do not trust Russian official media. They use a variety of sources of information, including Russian opposition and Ukrainian media. They tend to believe that the war will lead to economic decline in Russia, the impoverishment of the population, and the division of Russian society into warring camps (a particular concern to many of them).

These supporters of the war can also be critics of Putin's domestic policies, claiming for instance that "many problems have accumulated inside the country" during his rule.

### (4) Personal connections

The fourth group is most likely small, but still important: people who are personally connected with Donbas.

These people consider the "new war" a chance to end the "old war" – the ongoing conflict since 2014. They or their loved ones have already experienced the military actions of Ukraine towards the uncontrolled Donbas, have seen casualties among civilians, and are therefore not shocked by new victims. The prominent Russian propaganda cliché ("Where have you been for the last eight years?" – a reference to 2014) is a real-life experience for them.

This interview with a 28-year-old hairdresser originally from Horlivka, a town outside Donetsk, who moved to Moscow after 2014, illustrates this logic well:

*Q: Do people in Horlivka support the [military] action, do you think?*

*A: Well, those who are from Donetsk support it. Why? Because since 2014 people have endured [war].*

*Q: How do you think this will end?*

*A: I would like to see a truce already. I get photographs every day about how my friends are all dying.*

These people tend to treat the Russian authorities with indifference or even negativity, but at this "critical moment" they take its side, which may also be the same side as their loved ones.

For example, our next interviewee opposed the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and was involved in opposition activism – but in 2022 supported the war against Ukraine.

"My parents are there [in Donetsk]," he said, "so I've been following the situation all these years... I had to choose between my beliefs and between my friends; between all these Moscow creative and opposition circles and my parents... Although all these years I quarrelled with [my parents] about their attitude to politics, to Putin, to Russia. It is clear that it is pointless to convince them, therefore, at such critical moments, I believe that one must side with one's relatives so as not to be divided on this issue" (m, 34, Moscow, analyst, supports the war).

These people really hope – based on concrete experience rather than abstract belief – that the current invasion can "end the war". At the same time, in their view, the main goal of the Russian government should be ending hostilities in their homeland – they are less interested in a march of the Russian army on Kyiv than in another move in the confrontation between Russia and NATO. They probably now see that the end of the war will not come soon.

### (5) Support "despite everything"

Finally, one of the most interesting categories of supporters of the war are people who criticise the apparent causes, course and consequences of the conflict, yet respond positively when asked directly whether they support the invasion.

These people were relatively few among our informants,



*“For peace!” sign - written with symbol of Russian invasion - in Khimki, Moscow Photo: (c) Nikolay Vinokurov*

which is not surprising. These are precisely the people who are not ready to answer questions about the war; it is difficult to convince them to give an interview and therefore they are underrepresented in research samples.

Our interview with the following interviewee, a 49-year-old education worker from Chelyabinsk, is typical: “I was born in the USSR, and brought up in the spirit of patriotism, so I support my homeland, my state, because I simply cannot do otherwise.

“I am against the war, of course. I feel very sorry for the people who suffer [in Ukraine], because many of us have relatives, friends and acquaintances there. Everyone has someone there. Very few people don’t know anyone in Ukraine.

“Naturally, I am very worried; I feel a sense of shame, although I don’t understand what I am personally guilty of. Probably because these people have stopped sleeping

peacefully, living peacefully. And that is the fault of my state. That’s probably it.”

Throughout the rest of the interview, this woman frequently spoke about the negative aspects of the war, such as what Russian soldiers were experiencing (“it’s impossible to watch without crying when someone’s been buried or their body has been returned home”) or the destruction of Ukrainian cities.

Like some informants of this type, she was open to opposing points of view, and is sympathetic to the protesters against the war, but does not believe in the possibility of change. “I think the state should listen to why people oppose war. The protests are, for the most part, useless.”

This interview illustrates the fact that many Russians see the war in Ukraine in a contradictory way. They had little interest in politics and did not reflect on the relationship



between Russia and Ukraine before the invasion.

But after the war started, this group faced opposing ideological narratives; they have relatives and acquaintances in Ukraine, or children of military age who they are worried about; their friends and colleagues often bring forward conflicting facts; their immediate circle (including, say, opposition-minded children or relatives) try to convince them not to believe fakes; they feel sorry for people who are dying in Ukraine; their standard of living is falling due to sanctions; they do not see the point in what is happening, but believe there may nevertheless be important reasons for it.

These people do not have a consistent “opinion” that public opinion companies can measure, but they are “counted” as supporters of the war.

### Sources of information

Many supporters of the war trust Russian propaganda and receive information from official Russian sources, mainly television. But not all. Some of them actively use YouTube and Telegram, subscribe to many channels and check, among other things, Ukrainian media and Russian opposition news. For some supporters of the war – or those who are dissatisfied with what is happening, but declare their support for the “special operation” – it’s an overabundance of information that becomes a problem rather than a lack of it.

“We all understand that, one way or another, we are victims of various propaganda,” one student from Tyumen told us.

An analyst, 34, said: “I have a set of pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian [Telegram] channels. I try to differentiate between their agendas. I can’t say that the Ukrainian [channels] are particularly objective. I don’t really see a difference between what pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian channels show me.”

People who use Russian television as their main source of information, polls show, tend to trust this information, to support the “special operation” and to be older than those who actively use the internet. But this does not mean that all supporters of the war are consumers of state propaganda. Active users of YouTube and Telegram in Russia may escape the attention of polling campaigns due to their smaller number, but they, to a greater extent than TV viewers, participate in pro-war discussions, including online, where they help set the tone.

Some advocates of war, not surprisingly, refuse to call the

war a war. Others, however, criticise the use of the term “special operation” as an unnecessary euphemism. A 46-year-old entrepreneur from Yoshkar-Ola told us: “The conduct of military operations and the use of weapons is definitely war. You can hide anything under the term ‘special operation’. This is war. And there is no need to somehow veil it.”

### So what?

Our findings suggest that people can be “against the war” but in support of the “special operation” at the same time, and their answers can change depending on the political context, the media environment, and even the circumstances of the conversation.

But among Russian supporters of the war there are people whose perception of current events stems from long reflections on history and geopolitics, from views and sympathies formed over time. This type of support is much less amenable to change. Thus, we can say that the attitude of Russians towards the regime develops under the influence of state propaganda in general.

Our hypothesis – and one that we plan to test in the future – is that people’s perceptions of the war are changing significantly as the conflict draws on. We have not observed that people’s initial support for the war was replaced by rejecting it – supporters of the war continue to find justifications for Russian military actions. But in recent interviews, we rarely encounter unconditional support for what is happening.

Instead, more often we observe someone’s willingness to admit doubt or complain about a lack of understanding of the causes of the conflict. Whether this may at some point lead to a withdrawal of support is not yet clear.

Russia is in a strange moment. As people who are against the war, we must take people who support it – or who are designated as such – seriously. This does not mean we should share their faith or delusions about the war, but view them as real people, fellow citizens with whom we have to conduct a serious dialogue. Only in this way – and not by marginalising these people as crazy fanatics – can one succeed in communicating a different point of view to them. Dialogue with supporters of the war, which is necessary for campaigning against the war, must account for the diversity of Russian people’s support for the war, their likes and dislikes. After all, they will require an equally diverse set of persuasion strategies. □

*From openDemocracy*

# Gaza violence intensifies as Jerusalem clashes resume

Tia Goldenberg

Israel's air force and Palestinian militants traded fire across the Gaza frontier early Thursday as clashes erupted again at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site, worsening an escalation that has been eerily similar to the lead-up to last year's Israel-Gaza war.

The Gaza violence, fueled by the unrest between Israeli police and Palestinians in Jerusalem, appears to be the heaviest-cross-border fighting since last year's 11-day war and comes despite efforts to prevent a repeat. A rocket fired from Gaza earlier this week was the first to have been launched since the war.

The latest Israeli-Palestinian tensions boiled over after a series of deadly attacks by Palestinians against Israelis, which then sparked days-long, sometimes lethal, arrest raids by the military in a flashpoint West Bank city and spread into daily clashes in Jerusalem. This year, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan has coincided with Passover, a time of heightened religious observances and visits by large numbers of people to Jerusalem.

Palestinian militants fired two rockets toward Israel from the Gaza Strip late Wednesday and early Thursday, and Israeli aircraft hit militant targets in the seaside, Hamas-ruled enclave. One rocket landed in the southern Israeli city of Sderot, a frequent target, and another fell short and landed in Gaza, the Israeli military said. The launches set off air-raid sirens across parts of southern Israel, disrupting the quiet of the Passover holiday week.

Early Thursday, Israeli warplanes conducted airstrikes in the central Gaza Strip, local media reported. Social media posts by activists showed smoke billowing in the air. The Israeli military said the airstrikes were aimed at a militant site and the entrance of a tunnel leading to an underground complex holding chemicals to make rockets.

The military later said its planes attacked another Hamas compound after an anti-aircraft missile was fired from Gaza. It said the missile failed to hit its target and no injuries or damage were reported.

In Jerusalem, Israeli police said dozens of masked



*Israeli security forces escort a group of Jews outside Damascus Gate, in Jerusalem's Old City, Wednesday, April 20, 2022. Police prevented hundreds of ultra-nationalist Israelis from marching around predominantly Palestinian areas of Jerusalem's Old City. The event planned for Wednesday was similar to one that served as one of the triggers of last year's Israel-Gaza war. Photo: AP/UNB*

protesters holed up in the Al-Aqsa Mosque early Thursday, sealed the doors and began throwing rocks and firecrackers. Police said they attempted to disperse the Palestinians using “riot dispersal means,” without elaborating, and that forces did not enter the mosque itself.

A Palestinian official from the Waqf, which administers the site, said large numbers of police used stun grenades to clear out the site. He said police also fired stun grenades and rubber-coated bullets against Palestinians who had sealed themselves inside the mosque. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the incident with the media.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 20 people were injured, one critically.

Similar clashes have taken place throughout the week, while fiercer ones broke out at the site earlier this month, wounding more than 150 Palestinians and three police officers.

The Palestinians have accused Israeli police of using excessive force at the holy site, and Palestinian social media have been filled with videos showing Israeli forces striking what appear to be unarmed Palestinians, including women. Police say Palestinians instigate the violence and have released their own videos showing young Palestinian men throwing rocks and fireworks toward the security forces. Police say the Palestinians are desecrating their own shrine and putting others at risk.

An emergency meeting of a regional Arab committee convened in Jordan Thursday over what it called “illegal Israeli policies and measures” in Jerusalem. It condemned the Israeli actions, called them provocative and called on Israel to ensure that only Muslims worship at the site.

The committee includes member countries who have recently normalized ties with Israel, including the United Arab Emirates. The country’s top diplomat, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid spoke by phone Thursday. Al Nahyan called for stability, according to the United Arab Emirates’ state-run WAM news agency.

A U.S. State Department delegation is also in the region in a bid to secure calm.

The scenes of rocket fire and repeated violence in Jerusalem recalled the run-up to last year’s war. Last year, the violence also spread to mixed Jewish-Arab cities, which hasn’t happened in the current wave of unrest.

On Wednesday, hundreds of flag-waving Israeli ultra-nationalists marched toward predominantly Palestinian areas around Jerusalem’s Old City, a demonstration of Israeli control over the disputed city seen as a provocation by Palestinians. Last year’s war erupted during a similar march, when Gaza militants, declaring themselves the guardians of Jerusalem, fired a barrage of rockets toward the holy city.

Those events, along with other developments, led to an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas that killed over 250 Palestinians and 14 people in Israel, causing extensive damage in Gaza.

This year, Israeli police closed the main road leading to the Damascus Gate of the Old City and the heart of Muslim Quarter. After some pushing and shoving with police, the marchers rallied near the barricades, waving flags, singing and chanting.

Israeli nationalists stage such marches to try to assert sovereignty over east Jerusalem, which Israel seized in 1967, along with the West Bank and Gaza, and annexed in a move not recognized internationally. The Palestinians seek an independent state in all three territories and consider east Jerusalem their capital.

The hilltop shrine in the Old City is the emotional ground zero of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the center of previous rounds of violence. Known to Muslims as the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, it is the third holiest site in Islam. It is also the holiest site in Judaism, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, the site of their biblical temples.

Israel says it is maintaining a decades-old status quo at the site, which prevents Jews from praying there. But during the Passover holiday this year, visits by Jews have skyrocketed and in some cases Jews have been praying at the compound. Palestinians view the visits, under police escort, as a provocation and possible prelude to Israel taking over the site or partitioning it.

For Palestinians, the mosque compound, administered by Muslim clerics, is also a rare place in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem where they have a measure of control.

Palestinian militant groups in Gaza — the ruling Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad — have positioned themselves as defenders of the Jerusalem holy site. On Wednesday, Hamas said Israel would bear “full responsibility for the repercussions” if it allowed the marchers “to approach our holy sites.” □

*From the Associated Press*



# The Rwanda deal is yet another act of colonial violence

*Priti Patel's new policy is extreme, but Britain's borders were designed to protect the spoils of empire. The whole system needs to be challenged*

Laura Basu

When I heard about the decision to strip Shamima Begum of her British citizenship, two years ago, I went cold. Like me, she had been born and raised in east London. My mum tried to make me feel better: "Begum ran away to join ISIS, that's a pretty exceptional case," she told me. That wasn't the point. Ever since my brother and I were little, my parents had drilled into us that we were just as 'British' as anyone else, that we had just as much right to belong because we were born in Britain. Now, I realised that wasn't true. I knew that if they could do it to Begum, they could do it to me.

The new Nationality and Borders bill, if it passes unamended, will allow the state to strip people of their British citizenship without notice. This potentially affects 41% of people in England and Wales from an ethnic minority background, versus 5% of white citizens. The bill also allows for the removal of asylum seekers to other countries, as in the recently announced £120m deal with Rwanda. It also makes it a criminal offence to arrive in Britain without permission; requires Border Force to push back boats crossing the Channel; and expands the use of 'accommodation centres' like Napier Barracks.

People are rightly horrified by the Rwanda deal. The Archbishop of Canterbury has called it "ungodly". A total of 160 charities and campaign groups have described it as "shamefully cruel". A snap poll showed voters oppose the plan. The president of the Law Society of England and Wales has questioned whether it complies with international law.

Granted, this bill, and this government, are radically violent. But all borders are violent: that's what they're for. Borders are at the heart of a political economy rooted in colonialism. And the outsourcing of border control – with all the death and suffering that entails – is a defining feature of global capitalism today.

## Musical borders

In the year I was born, 1981, the British Nationality

Act marked the culmination of a series of immigration reforms that defined British identity as a national identity – rather than an imperial one. Former subjects of empire increasingly found themselves denied British citizenship, along with the access granted by citizenship to the spoils of that empire. Only those born in Britain or with a parent born in Britain had the right to enter or stay in the country. Ignoring the 90% of the world it had invaded, 'Britain' came to be understood as the small island whose population was 98% white.

Britain was built on colonialism. Following independence struggles across Asia and Africa, Britain's redrawing of its borders was part of the process of decolonisation. But it was simultaneously a grand neo-colonial gesture. As legal scholar Nadine El-Enany argues, Britain's borders serve to deny Britain's colonial debt and cut off its creditors from their rightful share of the national loot.

Borders, however, don't stay put. They can reach outwards across the globe, in the way that Britain's deal with Rwanda moves part of its border 4,000 miles south-east. And they can also reach inwards, as with the hostile environment strategy, which has turned landlords, teachers and doctors into border police. If you seem like you might be 'irregular' (e.g. if you have a 'funny tinge'), borders have a way of following you around.

Britain isn't the only one playing musical borders. Near where I live, in the village of Millingen am Rhein, a lonely cow nibbles a blade of grass in the spring breeze. Its front legs stand in Germany, its hind legs in the Netherlands. There's no border guard. No fence. No barbed wire. No guns. A few hundred miles to the south, the EU has spent billions of euros building walls and turning the Mediterranean Sea into a watery mass grave.

As Harsha Walia documents in her book 'Border and Rule', between 2000 and 2017, 33,761 people died or went missing trying to cross the Mediterranean. In 2018 and 2019, it was 4,184 – six every day. Of these, 90% were from



*U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel and Rwandan Minister Vincent Biruta sign the migration and economic development partnership between the U.K. and Rwanda. Photo Collected*

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and The Gambia. All former European colonies. For every person who dies in the Mediterranean, another two die in the Sahara desert trying to reach it.

That's just the start. The European Commission now insists that most development, trade and aid agreements with Middle Eastern and African countries include provisions to outsource migration controls. Commentators have noted that Rwanda stands accused – by the British government itself – of carrying out extrajudicial killings, disappearances and torture. But in 2016, the EU signed a border deal with Turkey to limit the movement of Syrians. The deal handed €6bn to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose government has committed war crimes against Kurds in Syria and arrested 160,000 dissidents who face waterboarding and electroshock.

The EU has also made deals with Libya, where more than half a million migrants and refugees face overcrowding, starvation, electrocution, torture, rape, forced labour and executions; and with Sudan's former dictator Omar al-Bashir. Border externalisation – the farming out of border control to other countries – has become a prime geopolitical bargaining chip.

### **Be the swarm**

The tale that Europhiles like to tell about the EU is one of peace and cosmopolitanism. After the Second World War, the story goes, the European powers wanted to make sure that such violence would never happen again, so they joined together in an economic and political union. But like Britain, the EU was a colonial project.

The European Economic Community, the EU's forerunner, was founded in March 1957, the same month Ghana declared its independence. Aware they were losing power on the world stage, European states contrived to keep

control of the African continent through what was known as the Eurafica project. The chairman of the Council of Europe's economic committee proclaimed in 1952: "We must also, if free Europe is to be made viable, jointly exploit the riches of the African continent, and try to find there those raw materials which we are getting from the dollar area, and for which we are unable to pay." As French historian Yves Montarsolo put it, "each time a new 'European' institution saw the day, Africa was always at the heart of all concerns."

Sociologist Gurinder Bhambra argues Europe was never a collection of nation-states. It was a group of imperial states, just like Britain was an imperial state. Following the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, European states saw only each other as sovereign, not other lands and peoples. In the face of decolonisation, Western Europe's former imperial powers decided to rebrand themselves as nation-states. That way, they got to conveniently forget about those other lands and peoples while still planning to exploit their resources. As with Britain, the borders erected by the new European project were actually acts of re-colonisation, blocking those who built Europe from accessing its wealth.

Chilling as it is, I was wrong to object to British citizenship not being guaranteed by birth. What I should have been objecting to were borders. Borders are the crux of an economic system that is imperialist by nature. Broken beyond repair, that system is now as desperate as Boris Johnson's government, and its borders have gone berserk.

Why should I be more entitled to Britain's wealth than anyone born outside its borders? Africans and Asians built Europe, and still do. Britain's tentacles extend across the globe. Britain is not a small island, it is everywhere. We are all British. Let's take what's ours. ◻

*From openDemocracy*

# Sri Lankan Economic Crisis: Lessons for Bangladesh and other Developing Countries

Golam Rasul



*Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa sings the national anthem of Sri Lanka during the country's Independence Day celebration in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Feb. 4, 2022. Sri Lanka's president appointed 17 new Cabinet ministers on Monday as he and his powerful family seek to resolve a political crisis resulting from the country's dire economic state. Photo: AP/UNB*

Sri Lanka is facing one of the worst economic crises in its history. Large foreign debt, low foreign exchange reserve, high inflation, shortage of food, fuel, medicine, and other essential items and long hours of load shedding made citizens' life miserable. The country has been struggling to repay the maturing debts and finance the current account deficit that is growing rapidly. Due to a lack of foreign currency, the country has struggled to import and pay for essential commodities. Government even has to postpone school examination due to shortage of paper. Hospitals are also running out of medicines. Extreme hardship and misery affected people very badly. Sri Lankan people are becoming increasingly frustrated, and they

are now on the street, which has eroded social order and created huge economic and political crisis.

Question arises as to what led Sri Lanka in this devastating crisis, what went wrong? Sri Lanka was the fast-growing economy in South Asia and ahead of many South Asian countries in many social indicators. To understand how Sri Lanka reached to such a devastating situation, we need to look at the country's economic policies taken by the present and past governments. The ongoing crisis is the result of the policies made by the past consecutive governments, especially of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime between 2005 and 2015 and since 2019 onwards when another Rajapaksa family member





*A man waves a Sri Lankan national flag as he stands on a barricade blocking the entrance to president's office during a protest in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Monday, April 11, 2022. Thousands of Sri Lankans protested calling on the country's president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign amid worst economic crisis in history. Photo: AP/UNB*

Gotabaya Rajapaksa came into power. During the period of Mahinda Rajapaksa, the government took a couple of ambitious projects with foreign loan, such as Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, Hambantota Port, and the Colombo Port City Development project. However, most of these projects failed to attract adequate private investment, generate business interest, and incurred losses. Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport is mostly empty, not even used 5% of its capacity. It has been a white elephant. Because of low return, the government's capacity to repay the loan has gone down and it is compelled to obtain more loans to cover the losses that has increased the debt burden further. At present, Sri Lankan debt burden reached over 100% of GDP. Eventually, the government leased out the Hambantota Port to a Chinese Company for 99 years so as to generate adequate return for repayment of debt.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power in 2019 promising rapid economic growth and to change the structure of the economy. Immediately after his assumption of the power, COVID-19 pandemic started. COVID-19 affected Sri Lanka's tourism sector badly, like in many other countries, which is an important

foreign exchange earning sector of the country. The tourism revenues fell sharply from \$7.5 billion in 2019 to \$2.8 billion in 2020. With the pandemic and the lockdowns, working people, particularly people working in informal and service sectors suffered a lot. While many workers from tourism and other informal sector lost their job and was moving to agriculture for subsistence and managing the crisis, the Sri Lankan government declared to become 100% organic and imposed a complete ban on the import of inorganic fertilizers. The ban on inorganic fertilizer and synthetic pesticides, without providing alternatives sources of organic fertilizers and pesticides hit the Sri Lankan agriculture very badly. The production of rice, which is staple food in Sri Lanka and tea, which is an important foreign exchange earner affected very badly along with other agricultural products, and food security that further deepened the already dwindling economy. It is reported in some studies that production of some crops shrunk by as much as 30%. Being frustrated with the situation, people left the land uncultivated. It is reported that as much as one third of the agricultural land remained uncultivated. All these put poor farmers at severe risk of food insecurity and returnee migrants'

work in a desperate situation. Due to shortage of food production, Sri Lanka has to import food from Myanmar, India and China. Although, the intention of fertilizer and pesticides ban was to reduce the import cost, but eventually it created further pressure on foreign exchange reserve as food import has increased and tea export reduced considerably due to reduction in production.

Many experts had warned the government that such a move could lead to adverse impact on food security. But ignoring the experts' advice, the government moved to 100% organic. During his 2019 election campaign, the Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had vowed to transform the country's agriculture sector into 100% organic. Despite COVID-19 pandemic and huge suffering of the urban informal workers, the government implemented the election manifesto. In 2019, the government took another popular move, cutting income and value-added tax across the board. Although, intention was to stimulate economy, tax cut in a time of pandemic, when public spending for social welfare increased considerably, has had a huge adverse impact on government revenue and increased fiscal deficit further that undermined the debt management further.

There was little substantive debate and discussion on these public policies in public sphere. Instead of debate and consultation, the Gotabaya government, following his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, has been trying to consolidate the power and increase the family influence in the government. Immediately after becoming President, he made 20th amendment in the Constitution to increase power and authority of the President. Besides increasing his own authority, Gotabaya Rajapaksa made an attempt to bring more members from the Rajapaksa family in the Cabinet and in important positions in the government. Five members of the Rajapaksa's family is serving in the Gotabaya's cabinet including the President and the Prime Minister. There is little room for disagreement in such a setting that the family decisions frequently become the government decisions. A multiparty democratic system is critically important for as a country's policy decisions

are based on its political system. In an authoritarian country, for example, decisions will be made from the top. In a democratic political system, on the other hand, power is allocated at various levels and decisions are made in a participatory manner, involving all important stakeholders, and weighing all possible options and implications.

Sri Lankan economic crisis offers some important lessons for Bangladesh and other developing countries. First, economics and politics are interrelated and influence each other. As suggested by the Nobel Laureate Economist Milton Friedman, political freedom is fundamental for economic freedom and in choosing economic policies. Concentration of power in a single family is risky for a country. Decision making power should be distributed at different levels and the process should be made transparent and democratic to ensure all perspectives are considered. Second, resources are scarce, and they have alternative uses. Scarce resources should be invested in such a way that generates maximum benefits to the society both short- and long-term. Making investments that are not economically viable can weaken the economy and increase the risk of eroding social and political stability as that happened in Sri Lanka right now. Moreover, overdependence on foreign loan can make the country vulnerable. Third, public policy decisions and choices should be made based on thorough analysis involving all stakeholders, taking into account the expert opinion, and examining scientific merits and demerits. No country can go for 100% organic in a year, as it is a long process that needs a long-term plan in preparing farmers and consumers and in making alternative arrangements for organic fertilizers and pesticides. Because of proper analysis and care should be taken when selecting public sector projects and making investment decisions. □

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tell us?**







# Little Spiderhunter: A good omen nearly lost from our villages

*Of the 14 species of Spiderhunters in the world, two live in Bangladesh. While the Streaked Spiderhunter is seen only in the hill forests, the Little Spiderhunter is hard to find*

Enam Ul Haque

A charming little bird darting between flowers of the Banana plants quickly drew our attention away from the eagles' nest we went to observe at the village named Bheduria in Bhola. The little bird is named 'Little Spiderhunter', a remarkable bird seldom seen in our villages these days.

The Little Spiderhunter visited every Banana plant with its outsize flower blooming red, radiant and eager to be pollinated. With its little talons, the bird grasped the leathery wrappers of the flower long enough to insert its curved bill into the long florets and suck up the nectar.

The astute flower kept a small cache of nectar in each bud so that the bird had to visit hundreds to have enough. It would not serve the flower if the bird had aplenty from only a few. That was all very fine for us; we cherished the opportunity to watch the rare bird up close for long.

The world has 14 species of Spiderhunters, of which only two live in Bangladesh: Little Spiderhunter and Streaked Spiderhunter. Although the Streaked Spiderhunter is seen only in the hill forests, the lovely Little Spiderhunter once lived in all villages.

That is not so anymore.



*Little Spiderhunter on Banana flower. Photo: Enam Ul Haque*

Over the recent years, the Little Spiderhunter has become a rare bird of Bangladesh, although its favourite Banana groves and orchards have not depleted as drastically in our villages. Quite possibly, there were other reasons for its population to crash in such a short period.

We speculated that the overuse of chemical pesticides and herbicides in our villages could be the cause of the fall of our Little Spiderhunter. The bird, probably, perished by eating poisoned pests since it took a lot of insects besides lapping up the nectar from the flower.

We still get to see the Little Spiderhunters more often in our hill forests. The hillsides have abundant wild Banana and, certainly, less of the chemical poisons. That, however, is about to change as tobacco cultivation is spreading fast through our hill districts.

We were thrilled to see the Little Spiderhunter visiting a Bellfruit Tree or Jamrul Gach in the front yard of our host in Bheduria. The bird seemed to love its large bell-shaped blossoms to probe into and the sturdy branches to hang from.

We noticed that the bills and the feet of the bird at the Bellfruit Tree were all black which meant that it was an adult male. The bird we saw in the Banana grove had pink feet and a pinkish lower bill. Certainly, that was a female. Those little differences separated the male from the female of this species.

Like the other members of the Sunbird family, the Spiderhunters can hover under the hanging flowers to get to the nectar. The agile male Spiderhunter of Bheduria was happy to feed on the pendulous flowers of Champoo Tree and Madhabilata vines by fluttering its wings rapidly to hang in the air for a few moments.

However, the Spiderhunters and others of the Sunbird family cannot remain suspended in the air as dexterously as the members of the Hummingbird family. The flying techniques and the metabolisms of those two distant families of birds are very different.

Little Spiderhunters use their fluttering flights more while building their cup-nests with fibres, filaments and cobwebs suspended under the umbrella-like Banana



*Little Spiderhunter in Bellfruit Tree. Photo: Enam Ul Haque*

leaves. They usually commence their courtship in April and start fashioning the nest in May in Bangladesh.

The indigenous people who collect Camphor wood from the forest of Sarawak in Malaysia greatly value the Spiderhunter. They think that the sighting of a Spiderhunter or hearing its call is a good omen. They enter treacherous forests only after seeing the bird or hearing its call.

We were not sure of the extent to which the Spiderhunter seen in Bhola could be considered a good omen for us. Except for the very sturdy ones, the population of many species of small birds has recently been in a nosedive in our country. Many of them could be extirpated before we even noticed their absence

and raised alarms.

We have been polluting and poisoning our little country so much that the little insectivorous birds are dying off very fast. The poison we use in agriculture, horticulture and tea estates may not kill an adult bird promptly, but it often impairs its capacity to reproduce successfully.

The two Little Spiderhunters of Bheduria might be able to nest in the Banana grove and successfully raise two chicks by June or July. To us, that would be a very good omen indicating that the people of Bhola had not poisoned their environment too much for those little birds to thrive. □

*Enam Ul Haque is the Chairman of WildTeam.  
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*Little Spiderhunter hovering. Photo: Enam Ul Haque*





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# Making a Difference: Enayet Chowdhury

Syed Nesar Ahmad

The educated youth of

Bangladesh has always been drawn to the informative journalism of Vox and the short, precise videos of Crash Course and Kurzgesagt, but they have often been left wondering why there is such a shortage of local infotainment in their country. Enayet Chowdhury, an academic by profession and YouTuber by choice, is working to fill this void with his own informative and explanatory content on YouTube and social media.

Enayet covers a wide range of contemporary issues in his videos, including myths about Covid-19 vaccines, the Flat Earth theory, the Taliban, the Pandora Papers, and the Paradise Scandal, among others. His unique approach to presenting these often complex and contemporary issues involves using satire and humor to make them more accessible and easy to understand. He currently has around 334k followers on Facebook and 189k subscribers on YouTube.

Enayet was inspired to start his YouTube channel by the late Prof Dr. Jamilur Reza Choudhury, and he is also a part of the Trinomial Podcast, which is one of the first and most popular of its kind in Bangladesh. In addition to his work as a YouTuber, Enayet is also a lecturer at the Institute of Water

- and Flood Management at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, where he previously graduated from the Department of Civil Engineering.

While Enayet claims to be an avid YouTube content consumer, he never thought he would become a content creator himself. He initially hesitated to start his own channel due to the pressure and uncertain prospects of success in the field. However, he eventually realized that if people like him, who can differentiate between good and bad content, do not create videos, it creates a vacuum that is filled with low-quality content.

For a long time, the prevailing belief was that Bangladeshi audiences were not ready for intelligent content. However, Enayet has managed to attract a loyal fanbase by offering exclusivity, maintaining a strong relationship with his audience, and incorporating a sense of humor in his videos. He believes that by explaining complex issues in a clear and objective manner, while also mixing in some humor, he can appeal to his audience, especially on YouTube.

Despite his success, Enayet finds it difficult to compete with the popularity of sensationalized content that strays from the truth. He also faces challenges in making informative content financially viable in Bangladesh, where

-infotainment is a relatively new and underdeveloped area. Most influencers rely on collaborations with brands and sponsored content to make money, but this is not an option for Enayet due to the controversial nature of some of his videos and the lack of fully entertaining content.

Despite these difficulties, Enayet remains committed to providing high-quality, informative content to his viewers and hopes to see the infotainment industry in Bangladesh continue to grow and develop

*Syed Nesar Ahmad*



Photo: Collected



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